

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 12, 2010

Washington D.C.-The acquittal of four Muslim men for the murder of a Coptic Christian man in the Upper Egypt town of Dairout is the latest example in a growing pattern of instances where individuals have not been brought to justice after committing violent acts against Christians and their property, said the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).

The February 22 acquittal dealt with the October 19, 2009 murder of Farouk Attallah, which reportedly was witnessed by a number of individuals. Four Muslim men were arrested by Egyptian authorities.

According to reports, Mr. Attallah's Christian son was involved in a romantic relationship with a Muslim girl. The Muslim men allegedly had planned to attack the young man, but when the attackers could not find him, they killed his father. The court stated the reason for the acquittal was insufficient evidence.

"This is one of more than a dozen incidents USCIRF has followed in the last year or so in which Coptic Christians have been the targets of violence," said USCIRF chair Leonard Leo, who led a USCIRF fact-finding delegation to Egypt in January. "This upsurge in violence and the failure to prosecute those responsible fosters a growing climate of impunity. We call on the government to appeal the verdict in the Attallah murder and bring the perpetrators to justice."

In Egypt, the government has 60 days to appeal a verdict.

In recent years, in response to sectarian violence, local Egyptian authorities have conducted "reconciliation" sessions between Muslims and Christians as a way of easing tensions and resolving disputes. "To be sure, we welcome reconciliation efforts, but they are in no way a substitute for enforcing the law and punishing people for wrongdoing," said Mr. Leo.

In another high-profile trial which resumes on March 20 in the Qena governorate, three Muslim men are charged with the January 6 killing on Coptic Christmas eve of six Christians and one Muslim in the small town of Naga Hammadi. The case is being heard by a state security court. "In accordance with international human rights standards, we urge the Egyptian government to prosecute the perpetrators to the fullest extent of the law through a fair and transparent trial," said Mr. Leo. "We believe Egypt's decision to bring this case quickly was important. At the same time, however, bringing one high-profile criminal case should not be mistaken for undertaking a comprehensive approach to investigating and prosecuting sectarian violence. Every case warrants attention."

Since 2002, Egypt has been on the USCIRF "Watch List" as a country with serious religious freedom violations, including widespread problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as disfavored Muslims.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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